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AUTHOR	Schwartzbeck, Terri Duggan
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ABSTRACT

Implementation of school reform is a much-studied and often-discussed topic among researchers and educators alike. To hear what researchers have to say about this issue, questions were put to the Network of Researchers about what trends and patterns they see in schools implementing comprehensive school reform. Researchers agree that it is difficult to draw conclusions about trends and patterns. The complexity of measuring student achievement and other outcomes, the difficulties found when schools are moving targets, and the unique ways schools adopt reform present many obstacles to discerning trends. However, some trends do emerge. For example, there will be fits and starts, and likely a dip of some kind in outcomes. If reform is working, there will be a sense of a tipping point, of critical mass, or of a click point. This point in development can take 3 to 5 years. Some things are easier to change than others. Altering climate is easier than modifying teaching and learning. Concrete, externally developed models tend to be easier to implement than process-based or local models. Finally, model developers can help identify key patterns by articulating model-specific benchmarks for each year of implementation. (RT)

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Research Brief

THE NATIONAL CLEARINGHOUSE FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

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The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform

Research Brief

THE NATIONAL CLEARINGHOUSE FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

Patterns in Implementing Comprehensive School Reform: What the Researchers Say

by Terri Duggan Schwartzbeck

Questions Addressed in This Brief:

- *What can researchers tell us about trends and patterns in implementing schoolwide reform?*
- *What are the impacts a school might expect in years one, two, and three?*
- *Are there key similarities in how change progresses, or does it vary from school to school and model to model?*
- *What elements of a model are easy or hard to put into practice? How long does it take for reforms to take root?*
- *What are the challenges of discerning patterns in implementation of comprehensive school reform?*

Introduction

Implementation of school reform is a much-studied and often discussed topic among researchers and educators alike. So what can researchers tell us about trends and patterns they see in schools implementing comprehensive school reform? Are there impacts a school can expect in year one versus year three? Is there a standard trajectory of how the reform progresses, or does it vary from school to school and model to model?

We put these questions to the Network of Researchers and learned much about what we know, and what we don't know, about trends and patterns in putting comprehensive school reform into practice. Here is some of what they had to say and the supporting research.

Implementation Looks Different Everywhere

One consensus that emerged quickly is that there is no set pattern of change across schools, across models, and within schools from classroom to classroom. "In my experience," said Sheila Rosenblum of Rosenblum Brigham Associates, "it's not linear...it's a bumpy road with fits and starts." For example, two schools in the same district attempting to execute the same model might see the reforms take hold in very different ways. It is also not uncommon to observe strong use of a model in one classroom and weak application in the classroom across the hall.

Though putting reforms into practice can take multiple forms, there are consistent lessons research has revealed about what schools and districts can expect when implementing comprehensive school reform.

Some Things Are Easier to Implement Than Others

Some elements of models are easier to establish in a school than others. "Boom! It's immediate!" said Betsy Useem of the Philadelphia Education Fund of how she had seen a school change its climate relatively quickly after instituting the Talent Development High School model. By (1) adding a ninth grade academy with its own section of the school and its own entrance and (2) moving to a block schedule to reduce hallway transitions and chaos, the climate of the school seemed to change overnight. However, Useem added, changing "the teaching and learning is much, much, harder. You have got to provide really intensive in-class coaching support, with curriculum coaches, in addition to professional development after school, Saturdays, and summers."

Additionally, as Billie Hauser of AEL mentioned, it tends to be easier to get test scores to improve in a single area rather than across the board. "We're finding that test scores will come up in any curricular area if you focus on that for a year," she pointed out.

Finally, there was a consensus among the researchers that for certain types of schools, certain types of models are easier to implement — although, of course, the needs of each school are unique. For one thing, research has shown that patterns of the course of change differ between externally developed models and locally developed models. Because locally developed models tend to require more time and planning than something that is already laid out, externally developed models tend to be easier to put into practice. Among the externally developed models, those that are focused on prescribed curriculum and rooted in content tended to be easier to implement than those focused on a process for reforming the school.

As Rebecca Herman of the American Institutes for Research pointed out, "We found that both the implementation and outcomes research suggest that concrete models seem to work better. They seem to be easier to implement and they seem to have better outcomes." But, as she elaborated, other research suggests that "there is a theory that the models that are more philosophically based really involve a lot of work and they take a lot longer to implement, a lot longer to see the effect."

The Initial Dip

There is also some consensus that at a point early in the change process, schools will witness a dip in outcomes (e.g., teacher satisfaction, student test scores), typically followed by recovery. This dip may be immediate or preceded by an increase in desired outcomes. Such a pattern reflects, for example, the ini-

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tial excitement of the staff as reform efforts commence, followed by dismay over the realization that change is hard, longer hours, and other stresses. Later, as positive results are seen, outcomes can improve again. As Steve Fleischman of the Education Quality Institute said, "I always analogize that sometimes when a patient goes into the hospital and starts medication, he or she may have a fever spike. That's a bad thing, but if you know that three days later the person is going to be a lot better because of the medication, that's a good thing."

Reform Takes Time — The "Click" Point

However, reforms do take more than three days to take root. Research indicates that it can take three to five years at a minimum, and sometimes more than five years for reforms to really take hold.

In addition to an early or initial dip, another trend in patterns of change identified by Sheila Rosenblum is the "click" point — the point where the model or reform is fully internalized and becomes a part of how the school does business. This click point is often observed in schools where the reform model has generally been successful, has widespread buy-in and support from staff, leaders, and parents, and is showing results. It takes time to reach the "click." The earliest it has been identified by Rosenblum is three years into the reform.

Model Developers Can Help

Particularly in the case of initial dips and increases in outcomes, model developers can provide some insight. An increasing number of model developers are providing implementation benchmarks to help schools assess where they should be by the end of year one, end of year two, and so on. These benchmarks might include measures of changes in outcomes or climate so that schools can gauge how they are doing. As Rebecca Herman explained, these benchmarks help indicate "what we expect to see if you're on schedule."

Challenges of Understanding Implementation Patterns

Several factors can hinder understanding of the patterns of change. For example, it is difficult to measure implementation, just as it is difficult to measure student achievement and other outcomes. Additionally, schools change faster than the reform can take place. Sometimes, teacher turnover is so high that in terms of training needs, every year is like year one.

Another confounding factor lies in looking at, for example, different cohorts of schools engaging in comprehensive reform. If there is a series of schools that begins in Year 1, followed by another set that begins in Year 2, and so on, one might expect the first group of schools to contain the strongest implementers of change. But in fact, these are often the schools where the need is greatest and the capacity lowest — and thus the most likely to struggle through any attempts at change. By contrast, a second year cohort might see better results, having taken the time to become informed about school reform models and their own needs.

Conclusion

It is difficult to draw conclusions about trends and patterns in comprehensive school reform implementation, the researchers agree. The complexities of measuring student achievement and other outcomes, the difficulties found when schools are moving targets, and the unique ways schools adopt reform present many obstacles to discerning trends. However, some themes do emerge:

- There will be fits and starts, and likely a dip of some kind.
- If it's working, there will be a sense of a tipping point, of critical mass, of a click point. This can take three to five years.
- Some things are easier to change than others. Altering climate is easier than modifying teaching and learning; and concrete, externally developed models tend to be easier to implement than process-based or local models.
- Model developers can help identify key patterns by articulating model-specific benchmarks for each year of implementation.

Supporting Research

Laura Desimone's *Making Comprehensive School Reform Work*, published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, provides an overview and literature review on implementation factors.
http://www.edrs.com/DocLibrary/1100/ED-141915.PDF

Michael Fullan's book, *Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform*, is a study in patterns of education change.

This brief is the product of conversations over a two day period with the Network of Researchers, the principal investigators of CSR studies. This group met October 25 — 26, 2001, in Washington, D.C.

About NCCSR

The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) collects and disseminates information that builds the capacity of schools to raise the academic achievement of all students. This is accomplished by continuously examining the literature related to CSR, adding high quality materials to the databases and actively sending useful information to educators and policy makers at the local, state, and national levels. Through its web site, reference and retrieval services, and publications, NCCSR is the central gateway to information on CSR.

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Email: AskNCCSR@goodschools.gwu.edu

The National Clearinghouse
for Comprehensive School Reform
2121 K Street, Suite 250
Washington, DC 20037

Toll Free Phone: (877) 766-4277
Toll Free Fax: (877) 308-4995

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